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Source: *Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 47, No. 4 (Oct., 2008), pp. 827-851
Published by: Cambridge University Press on behalf of The North American Conference on British Studies
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/25482894
Accessed: 18-08-2014 15:35 UTC

Mass-Observation, Market Research, and the Birth of the Focus Group, 1937–1997

Joe Moran

Writing in 1998, Philip Gould, the Labour Party's chief pollster, observed: "With the exception of 'spin-doctors,' no campaigning phrase has been imbued with a greater air of nonsensical mystique than 'focus groups.' Why focus groups should have gained this elevated position I cannot tell."[1] The term originated in U.S. advertising, and American market research agencies have used the practice since at least the mid-1960s, but it was not until the mid-1990s that the term "focus group" first entered wide currency in Britain. It was understood as a form of market research that had filtered into political campaigning from more directly commercial fields.[2]

The defenders and critics of the focus group tended to agree on one thing: it was a new feature of 1990s British political life. One typically hostile newspaper article argued that the "use of techniques developed to sell soap-powders as a means of selling political parties can be seen as emblematic of a quantum shift in the nature of politics itself."[3] Gould, meanwhile, defended his focus groups as "simply old-fashioned qualitative research," which was "part of a necessary dialogue between politicians and people." But he also presented them as an entirely new phenomenon in the history of the party, a product of the New Labour "revolution" in the mapping of voter preferences.[4]

This article will argue instead that the focus group can be traced back to a much larger series of connections between market research, a growth industry in Britain since the mid-1930s, and political culture. The roots of this crossover between market and political research lie in the work of the eclectic social research orga-

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[1] Philip Gould, *The Unfinished Revolution: How the Modernisers Saved the Labour Party* (London, 1999), 326.

[2] For a history of the use of focus groups within the Labour party, see Margaret Lees-Marshment, *Political Marketing and British Political Parties: The Party's Just Begun* (Manchester, 2001), 134–210.

[3] David Thomas, "What Does Tony Blair Have in Common with a Pair of 501s?" *Observer*, 11 August 1996.

[4] Gould, *The Unfinished Revolution*, 328, 326.

Journal of British Studies 47 (October 2008): 827–851
 0021-9371/2008/4704-0005$10.00

nization Mass-Observation, founded in 1937, and rival organizations emerging around the same time. There has been much recent work on Mass-Observation's anthropology of daily life—its ethnographic studies of everyday environments such as pubs and factories, rooted in both colonialist ethnography and the Victorian social survey tradition—and its pioneering use of diaries and personal testimonies submitted by its volunteers.[5] But there has been less discussion of its links with market research, polling, and private research for political parties. This line of inquiry points to one of the most significant continuities between the prewar and postwar incarnations of Mass-Observation. It also reveals the connections between this organization and a much wider area of unofficial social research, conducted outside of government and academia, the main growth areas for social research in the postwar era. British political and market research were richly intertwined from as early as the 1930s, when Mass-Observation conducted some of the earliest private political research. Moreover, these close connections were initiated not by market researchers but by the political left, grounded at first in the problem of apathy among the Labour party's core supporters and drawing on the relatively high status of market research. When these various forms of research became intermittently a subject of public and press debate, there were often striking parallels in the anxieties they created—from early fears about Mass-Observers "snooping" to later criticisms of the focus group as a manipulative and secretive form of "spin."

Historians of the Mass-Observation project have briefly noted these parallels with modern market and political research. In 1999, Tom Jeffery observed that Mass-Observation "carries a certain contemporary resonance as focus groups and panels come to supplement, if not supplant, quantitative opinion research in Blair's Britain."[6] Nick Hubble's recent history of Mass-Observation similarly notes in an aside that the organization's research methods are "the direct precursors of the sampling and focus group work that has become so influential in Britain since the 1990s."[7] My article aims to explore in more depth some of the connecting threads between these earlier forms of research and the modern-day focus group—although, as Gould's comments above suggest, the latter attained mythic cultural status when it was actually only one of a series of diverse methodologies that could loosely be labeled "psychographics."

I want to argue that, in these qualitative areas like motivation research, psychographics, and focus group research, two of the initial impulses of Mass-Observation survived. The first was the chaotically eclectic combination of different methodologies from statistics, social psychology, sociology, and anthropology—at a time when academic social research, by contrast, was becoming increasingly professionalized and specialized. The second was the interest in the relationship between political identities and social lifestyles, informed by the same sense that politics was not simply about measuring fixed opinions—what would today be

[5] See, e.g., James Buzard, "Mass-Observation, Modernism, and Auto-Ethnography," *Modernism/Modernity* 4, no. 3 (September 1997): 93–122; and Julian Yates, "Shift Work: Observing Women Observing, 1937–1945," in *Women's Experience of Modernity, 1875–1945*, ed. Ann L. Ardis and Leslie W. Lewis (Baltimore, 2003), 274–76.

[6] Tom Jeffery, *Mass-Observation: A Short History*, 2nd ed. (Brighton, 1999), viii.

[7] Nick Hubble, *Mass-Observation and Everyday Life: Culture, History, Theory* (Basingstoke, 2006), 3.

called the "rational choice" model of conventional polling, a model that has come to dominate professional political science—but about uncovering more nebulous thoughts and feelings. Like Mass-Observation, this type of research rejected social scientific "neutrality" in favor of more short-term, strategic aims. Responding to the perceived problem of voter ignorance and apathy, it was concerned with shaping opinion as well as recording it. But this article also aims to show the complex and circuitous nature of the connecting threads between these different types of research conducted from the 1930s to the 1990s, which tells us much about the changing nature of political culture in the intervening years. A key question here is how the qualitative research methods pioneered in the 1930s came to be directed at the narrow question of deciphering consumer choice—whether in the marketplace or the polling booth.

My aim is to examine how all these forms of nonacademic social research fed into what James Vernon calls the "political imagination," the conventional wisdoms and meanings that shape the rhetorical relationship between government and people, and consequently the nature of popular participation in politics.[8] Until recently, the cultural and linguistic turn of this "new political history" has had more impact on the fields of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century history than on the historiography of the post–Second World War period.[9] Understandings of electoral politics of the postwar era have been dominated by two models: the "sociological" and "individual rationality" frameworks. The first, influenced by the Michigan studies of presidential elections in the 1950s and brought to Britain in David Butler's seminal Nuffield election studies, emphasized the importance of social contexts, social class, and social psychological attachments in the electoral choices made by individual voters. The second, influenced by Anthony Downs's classic 1957 study *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, presented individual voters as utility-maximizing consumers of politics.[10] These competing models, and complex variations on them, provided models of considerable theoretical and analytical rigor. But both tended to treat political parties as responding to some a priori notion of "the people," whether social or market-based. They focused on calibrating the thoughts and feelings of the electorate—usually seen as sovereign individuals responding to perceived collective or individual interests—rather than on how that electorate was itself imagined and constructed by political culture. They neglected to explore how, as Jon Lawrence puts it, political representation "is always imperious, always implies speaking in the name of others, constructing a politics based on external (and highly partial) perceptions of other peoples' needs and interests."[11]

More recently, historians of British political culture between the 1940s and

[8] James Vernon, *Politics and the People: A Study in English Political Culture c. 1815–1867* (Cambridge, 1993), 332.

[9] See, e.g., Vernon, *Politics and the People*; James A. Epstein, *Radical Expression: Political Language, Ritual, and Symbol in England, 1790–1850* (Oxford, 1994); and Jon Lawrence, *Speaking for the People: Party, Language and Popular Politics in England, 1867–1914* (Cambridge, 1998).

[10] For a discussion of these two models, see Harold D. Clarke, David Sanders, Marianne C. Stewart, and Paul Whiteley, *Political Choice in Britain* (Oxford, 2004), 5–10. See also Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (New York, 1957).

[11] Lawrence, *Speaking for the People*, 150.

1960s have sought to challenge the methodological individualism of conventional electoral sociology or rational choice models by placing a greater emphasis on contested cultural politics and collective meanings and focusing on the ways in which the political sphere itself created an idea of "the people" or "the voters."[12] This article aims to form part of this ongoing work and to extend some of the insights of the "new political history" up to the 1990s by shedding light on the shadowy area of nonacademic research that existed alongside an increasingly professionalized electoral sociology. As Lawrence Black writes, market research and opinion polling "would seem a characteristic product of the . . . duality of modernity—at once a means of understanding and controlling society and a recognition of the expansion of selfhood and popular choice."[13] In this vein, I want to show how, in this period, these different kinds of market and political research contributed to new understandings of the relationship between electors and elected and between consumer capitalism and social democracy.

■ ■ ■

From its beginnings in 1937, Mass-Observation's understanding of political culture was both analytical and strategic; it wanted to make sense of the cultural and social constraints on political participation but also change them. One of its aims was to challenge what it called "the voicelessness of everyman and the smallness of the group which controls fact-getting and fact-distributing" in Britain.[14] Formed less than a decade after every adult over twenty-one had won the vote, Mass-Observation noted that there were few systematic attempts to canvass the opinions of this electorate. Until the mid-1930s, there was little organized effort by either the press or politicians to solicit the views of voters, despite the latter's constant rhetorical invocations of "the 'Man in the Street.'"[15] Mass-Observers were some of the first people to interview Britons in the street using questionnaires—for which they were often criticized in the press as "busy-bodies," "snoopers," and "psycho-anthropologic nosey-parkers."[16] But, as Judith Heimann argues, they may also have prepared the public for the greater role of market research in the postwar period by normalizing questionnaire-taking as a feature of daily street life.[17]

[12] See, e.g., Lawrence Black, "'What Kind of People Are You?' Labour, the People and the 'New Political History,'" in *Interpreting the Labour Party: Approaches to Labour Politics and History*, ed. John Callaghan, Steven Fielding, and Steve Ludlam (Manchester, 2003), 23–38, and *The Political Culture of the Left in Affluent Britain, 1951–64: Old Labour, New Britain?* (Basingstoke, 2003), 3–6; and Steven Fielding, "A Mirror for England? Cinematic Representations of Politicians and Party Politics, circa 1944–64," *Journal of British Studies* 47, no. 1 (January 2008): 107–28.

[13] Lawrence Black, review of *Moments of Modernity: Reconstructing Britain 1945–1964*, ed. Becky Conekin, Frank Mort, and Chris Waters, *Contemporary British History* 14, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 188.

[14] Mass-Observation, *Britain*, arranged and written by Tom Harrisson and Charles Madge (1939; repr., London, 1986), 9.

[15] Ibid., 36.

[16] Charles Madge and Tom Harrisson, eds., *First Year's Work, 1937–38, by Mass-Observation* (London, 1938), 87.

[17] See Judith Heimann, *The Most Offending Soul Alive: Tom Harrisson and His Remarkable Life* (Honolulu, 1998), 158.

In its attempts to measure the mood of the people, Mass-Observation had two new and serious rivals, both originating in America: opinion polls and market research. Opinion pollsters presented their techniques as the neutral servant of democracy, "a 'scientific' and 'objective' instrument [which] would tabulate and project the views of average men and women into the chambers of decision makers, thus serving to reanimate public life." However, opinion polling clearly originated in the 1920s in more commercial market research that targeted specific sections of the "buying public."[18] The emergence of Mass-Observation coincided almost exactly with the arrival of opinion polling in the United Kingdom. Henry Durant's British Institute of Public Opinion (BIPO), the British wing of the American organization founded by George Gallup, opened on 1 January 1937, a few weeks before Charles Madge, Tom Harrisson, and Humphrey Jennings's joint letter in the *New Statesman* inaugurating the Mass-Observation project.[19] From 1938, using the then relatively new technique of random sampling, BIPO produced a monthly digest of political opinion for the *News Chronicle*.[20]

Mass-Observation had its roots more in observational anthropology than statistical sociology, particularly in the case of its leading figure, Tom Harrisson, an anthropologist who had already spent a year with a tribal community in Malekula in the western Pacific. In its prewar incarnation, however, Mass-Observation was ambivalent about, rather than hostile toward, these more quantitative forms of social survey. Its book, *Britain* (1939), enthusiastically refers to statistics, although Mass-Observation had neither the money nor the expertise for scientific sampling. Such methodological differences were beyond most readers, however. Angus Calder argues that the bestselling *Britain* may have contributed to the "growing public acceptance of the usefulness of sample polls."[21] On the cover of the first edition of *Britain*, Mass-Observation claimed that its National Panel numbered "some two thousand," although the number of regular contributors was actually never more than about 400. Calder suggests that 2,000 was a largely symbolic number, cited because it equaled the minimum sample used by BIPO and the number of people on the British Broadcasting Corporation's (BBC's) Listener Research panel, begun in September 1937.[22]

The cognate area of market research was an American innovation that was used in Britain from the early 1930s onward in the three major advertising agencies: the London Press Exchange, J. Walter Thompson, and Lintas. From the beginning, it was never simply limited to the study of markets; it had a socially progressive reputation, and its practitioners often worked closely with government. In the late 1930s, Mark Abrams of the London Press Exchange surveyed housing conditions in north London for the Gas, Light, and Coke Company and studied working-

[18] Daniel J. Robinson, *The Measure of Democracy: Polling, Market Research, and Public Life, 1930–1945* (Toronto, 1999), 4, 8.

[19] Tom Harrisson, Humphrey Jennings, and Charles Madge, "Anthropology at Home," *New Statesman and Nation*, 30 January 1937, 155.

[20] Angus Calder, "Introduction to the Cresset Library Edition," in Mass-Observation, *Britain*, ix.

[21] Ibid., x.

[22] Ibid.

class diets for the government to prepare the groundwork for wartime rationing.[23] As a freelance organization, Mass-Observation soon found itself competing with market researchers for the same commissions and occasionally working alongside them. In 1937, for example, it cooperated with Lintas on a report on the social prejudices against margarine (in anticipation of the wartime rationing of butter).[24]

Unlike these other emergent fields of research, however, Mass-Observation was interested in both the rituals of electoral politics and the politics of daily life, as well as the relationship between the two. In particular, it explored the ways in which new forms of virtual community created by mass culture, like newspaper astrology and the football pools, substituted for participation in democratic politics and interest in world events like the Munich crisis.[25] Mass-Observation was particularly interested in how the football pools mimicked the democratic process, offering people more powerful social identifications than their sense of themselves as voters.[26] Other commentators at this time noted the disjuncture between the football pool craze of the 1930s and indifference to domestic and international politics. In *The Road to Wigan Pier*, George Orwell recounts being in Yorkshire when Germany invaded the Rhineland in March 1936. This international event "aroused hardly a flicker of interest locally, but the decision of the Football Association to stop publishing their fixtures in advance (this was an attempt to quell the Football Pools) flung all Yorkshire into a storm of fury."[27] Mass-Observation's work thus formed part of a wider recognition of popular disillusionment with politics at this time, which was all the more notable because it emerged so soon after the achievement of universal suffrage.[28] Nonvoters were perceived as a threat to democracy, and the language used to describe them was often harsh. In 1924, one journalist berated the "supine electors" who, through "sheer indifference, sheer idleness . . . will not take the trouble to do their duty as good citizens on polling day."[29] Between 1921 and 1939 there were three private members' bills proposing to punish nonvoters with disenfranchisement, fines, and even imprisonment.[30]

Mass-Observation formed part of a broader interwar tradition that believed education could address the problem of the ignorance and apathy of electors. In 1930 the popular historian and liberal politician Ramsay Muir wondered about the origins of "this strange indifference to the privileges of citizenship, now that they are universally enjoyed" and "what provision our system makes for affording

[23] Colin McDonald and Stephen King, *Sampling the Universe: The Growth, Development and Influence of Market Research in Britain since 1945* (London, 1996), 69; Philip Kleinman, *Market Research: Head Counting Becomes Big Business* (London, 1985), 9–10.

[24] Stork spreading campaign carried out by Lintas Ltd., 1937, TC Food 1937–53, 67/1/A, Mass-Observation Archive, Special Collections, University of Sussex Library.

[25] Mass-Observation, *Britain*, 7.

[26] Madge and Harrison, *First Year's Work*, 32–40.

[27] George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937; repr., Harmondsworth, 1989), 82.

[28] See "Holborn Contest," *The Times*, 22 June 1938; and "Fulham Polling Tomorrow," *The Times*, 5 April 1938.

[29] Christopher Durrant, "Those Who Are Not Interested in Politics," *Daily Mirror*, 25 October 1924.

[30] See "Prison for Non-Voters," *Daily Mirror*, 22 April 1921; "Make Them Vote," *Daily Mirror*, 28 November 1935; "Vote or Be Fined," *Daily Mirror*, 29 May 1939.

leadership, knowledge and understanding to these listless masters of our fate."[31] In 1934 Ernest Simon, the Manchester industrialist and sometime Liberal MP, cofounded with Eva Hubback the Council for Education for Citizenship, which campaigned to promote the teaching of civic education in secondary schools, a theme pursued in their book *Training for Citizenship* (1935).[32]

Mass-Observation's research on voter apathy was intended to result in a book-length study, *Politics and the Non-Voter*, but it was delayed and never published because of the organization's wartime commitments. Nonetheless, Mass-Observation's interest in the subject differentiated it from opinion polls and market research, which did not generally register the strength of feeling of respondents other than to record nonresponses to survey questions. For Mass-Observation, the discrepancy between "what people say they do and what they actually do, what leaders think people want and what people do want . . . finds a concrete and obvious expression in the non-voter—regarded by politicians as something outside their province, something that is 'not a political animal,' and is best ignored."[33] That said, the correlation that Mass-Observation made between electoral apathy and enthusiastic participation in mass culture was largely suggestive. In 1938 the organization found, for example, that people who attended dance halls were 12 percent less likely to vote than those who did not. Harrisson attributed this to "the tremendous individualist, 'selfish,' and thus 'anti-social' effect of jazz education," which has become "our mass-poetry and a new folk-lore."[34] But it may simply have been that young people under the age of twenty-five were both the most likely to go dancing and the least likely to vote. The problem was how to measure and account for such a nebulous thing as "apathy"—a problem that would remain for market researchers and pollsters in the postwar era.

Mass-Observation was therefore interested in the broad area that Vernon calls "electoral poetics": at least a decade before the serious statistical analysis of elections began, it realized that "elections were so much more than psephologists allow."[35] More contentiously, it extended this concern beyond education into practical politics, attempting to manipulate new forms of mass culture to encourage people to vote. Noting the similarities between voting and filling in a pools form, it commented that, while millions paid to put crosses on complicated coupons, "nearly half the people who do this will not put a cross on a piece of paper once a year at no expense to themselves, in order to help decide who shall control their rates and bus fares and gas bills."[36] In local elections in Bolton in 1937, Mass-Observation produced three election leaflets: one printed in the style of a football-pool coupon, with "home matches to be played on Monday, Nov. 1st, 1937" (the date of the election) and "more than a million pounds to be paid out by the new

[31] Ramsay Muir, *How Britain Is Governed: A Critical Analysis of Modern Developments in the British System of Government* (1940; repr., London, 1930), 3–4.

[32] Ernest Simon and Eva M. Hubback, *Training for Citizenship* (London, 1935).

[33] Madge and Harrison, *First Year's Work*, 32.

[34] Tom Harrisson, "Whistle While You Work," in *New Writing, New Series I, Autumn 1938*, ed. John Lehmann (London, 1938), 56–57, 66.

[35] Vernon, *Politics and the People*, 80.

[36] Madge and Harrisson, *First Year's Work*, 32.

council"; a second drawn in comic strip form; and a third in the style of a dance-hall poster.[37]

Apathy affected the Labour party disproportionately, because it had more difficulty getting its vote out in elections than other parties. Although Mass-Observation was not working officially for Labour and Harrisson declared himself a supporter of the Liberal party, their joint concern with voter apathy brought them into a loose alliance in the late 1930s. During its survey of a by-election in West Fulham in April 1938, Mass-Observation worked closely with the Labour leader of the London County Council, Herbert Morrison, and noted that, although the by-election took place at the height of the Munich crisis, foreign affairs came at the bottom of a list of concerns headed by more mundane worries like the cost of living and unemployment.[38] The section on this by-election in *Britain* begins with a series of answers given by members of the public to the question "What do you think about the country's foreign policy?" The answers are all along the lines of "I'm not sufficiently educated to say" or "I don't understand so I don't like to express my opinions." Mass-Observation noted that of those asked, 35 percent did not answer at all, and of those that did, 40 percent gave answers that were "uncertain, ignorant, bewildered."[39]

Arguably, Mass-Observation's electoral tactics in the by-election added to this confusion. In a strategy named "Vote Killer," it distributed leaflets using the slogans, typography, and color of the Conservative party, consisting of muddled statements by Tory politicians and urging Conservative sympathizers not to vote.[40] Elsewhere, in *Britain*, Harrisson suggested that the progressive, classless potential of the dance craze, the Lambeth Walk, could be used for more directly political ends to encourage people to turn out at elections by changing the lyrics to "Do yourselves good/Swelling the Labour Vote."[41] This was part of a more general debate over publicity strategies within the Labour party at this time between "the educationalists," who believed that "campaigning was primarily about converting people to their cause," and "the persuasionalists," who were more likely to believe that apathy was a central problem and that propagandistic means were necessary to win support among these voters.[42] This latter group tended to agree with Mass-Observation that voter disinterest required more varied research techniques that could engage with public feelings as well as easily quantifiable "opinions." It was partly Mass-Observation's willingness to engage in such diverse and politically partisan research methods that led to it being attacked by more conventional social scientists as unrigorous and unscholarly.[43]

The outbreak of war foregrounded this notion that public opinion could not just be mechanically measured by questionnaires. The war helped to solidify the prewar sense that market research methods could also be used to calibrate more

[37] Tom Harrisson, *Britain Revisited* (London, 1961), 79–81, 106.

[38] Harrisson, *Britain Revisited*, 107; Julian Trevelyan, *Indigo Days* (1957; repr., London, 1996), 100.

[39] Mass-Observation, *Britain*, 40–41.

[40] Trevelyan, *Indigo Days*, 101; see also Harrisson, *Britain Revisited*, 108.

[41] Mass-Observation, *Britain*, 175–76.

[42] Dominic Wring, *The Politics of Marketing the Labour Party* (Basingstoke, 2005), 16–19.

[43] See, e.g., Raymond Firth, "An Anthropologist's View of Mass-Observation," *Sociological Review* 31, no. 2 (April 1939): 166–93.

general social attitudes and political moods. The new concept of civilian "morale" was inherently political, acknowledging the influence of shifting feelings on the relationship between the people and their leaders. "No one knew how to define morale, measure it, or affect it," argues Paul Addison, "but all were agreed that it was there: it was the woolliest and most muddled concept of the war."[44] For that reason, however, it could not be measured by random sampling: it demanded the kind of proto-interdisciplinary thick description practiced by organizations like Mass-Observation. Morale was a constantly changing collective psychology, unlike the statistical aggregate of privately held opinions measured in polls. What was needed, argued Harrisson and Charles Madge, was "a war barometer," based on careful social observation, to track these changes in morale.[45] Impressed by its analysis of the public mood during the Munich crisis, the Ministry of Information commissioned Mass-Observation to study how the public was coping with hardships like rationing and the blackout. Mass-Observation observed people and asked them very general direct questions such as "what do you think of the news today?" and noted the often freeform answers.[46] The highly politicized nature of daily life during the war made this flexible research methodology more suited than opinion polling to measuring the public mood. Harrisson wrote that the war brought Mass-Observation "into its own sort of own" because it could interpret "those amorphous marshlands of the mind."[47]

As the war progressed, however, it became clear that there would not be a collapse of morale, and so there was less urgency in measuring it. After July 1940, Mass-Observation's reports on morale became less frequent, and the Ministry of Information terminated its contract in September 1941.[48] As attention began to turn to what would happen when the war was over, the tracking of morale began to be superseded by more systematic government research on people's needs in preparation for postwar reconstruction. The Ministry of Information's Home Intelligence Division, for example, initiated the Wartime Social Survey in Spring 1941, recruiting most of its researchers from either Mass-Observation or market research firms.[49] It focused not so much on morale as on less politically contentious subjects like cooking habits, clothing needs, and domestic heating and lighting problems. Perhaps perceiving that Mass-Observation was under threat from this more "scientific" social research, Tom Harrisson began to make the case for qualitative methodologies more forcefully. His preface to *The Pub and the People*,

[44] Paul Addison, *The Road to 1945* (1975; repr., London, 1994), 121.

[45] Tom Harrisson and Charles Madge, eds., *War Begins at Home by Mass-Observation* (London, 1940), v.

[46] Robert Mackay, *Half the Battle: Civilian Morale during the Second World War* (Manchester, 2003), 66. See also Ian McLaine, *Ministry of Morale: Home Front Morale and the Ministry of Information in World War II* (London, 1979), 84–86.

[47] Tom Harrisson, *World Within: A Borneo Story* (London, 1959), 162–63. For a further discussion of Mass-Observation's research on morale, see Angus Calder, "Mass-Observation, 1937–1949," in *Essays in the History of British Sociological Research*, ed. Martin Bulmer (Cambridge, 1985), 130.

[48] Mackay, *Half the Battle*, 10–11; Hubble, *Mass-Observation and Everyday Life*, 187.

[49] National Statistics, *60 Years of Social Survey, 1941–2001* (Norwich, 2001), 7; see also Hubble, *Mass-Observation and Everyday Life*, 8.

written in August 1942, complains about "the obsession for the typical, the representative, the 'statistical sample.'"[50]

After the war, Mass-Observation found itself threatened from several angles. It was dealt a serious blow when the 1946 *Clapham Report* advised that social and economic research be carried out mainly by government departments or universities.[51] In the immediate postwar period, the practical problems of reconstruction seemed more of a research priority than the sociopsychological study of popular moods in which Mass-Observation had specialized. The Wartime Social Survey became the Social Survey and extended its activities, incorporating training in social-scientific methodologies and replacing quota sampling with more reliable random sampling, which was widespread by about 1950.[52] From the early 1950s onward, social research was increasingly channeled into academic sociology, like the sophisticated econometrics undertaken at Nuffield College at Oxford and the policy-oriented "political arithmetic" of the London School of Economics.[53] Nuffield also pioneered the academic study of voter behavior in its famous election studies, initiated in 1945 and led after 1951 by David Butler, and its large-scale surveys clearly helped to supplant Mass-Observation's more ad hoc, impressionistic accounts of elections.

A much bigger threat to Mass-Observation was the rapid rise of quantitative opinion polling. In 1945, BIPO predicted a Labour victory, but the *News Chronicle*, which published the poll, was sufficiently skeptical to forecast a Conservative win.[54] However, the poll's accuracy was a key moment in the legitimatization of polling. (Tom Harrisson, more intuitively, had also predicted a Labour landslide in *Political Quarterly* in 1944.)[55] By 1947, there were regular opinion polls in both the *News Chronicle* and *Daily Express*, two newspapers with a combined readership of nearly 13 million.[56] Newspapers and radio broadcasters made fun of the pollsters' bean-counting methodology. The *Daily Express*'s Beachcomber satirized them frequently in his column, while Tommy Handley conducted a "Galloping Poll" on the radio show *Itma*. A 1948 cartoon in *Punch* showed a queue snaking round a street corner, the end point out of sight. The poll-taker is saying to his colleague: "31 per cent say nylons; 24 per cent say fish; 2 per cent the Kew bus; 43 per cent no opinion."[57]

Mass-Observation focused on this category of "don't knows" and "puzzled people" in the late 1940s—because they were being ignored by more quantitative polling. Mass-Observation surveys punctured any postwar illusion of New Jerusalemism by uncovering the reality of popular ignorance, apathy, and pessimism.[58]

[50] Tom Harrisson, "Preface," in Mass-Observation, *The Pub and the People: A Worktown Study* (1943; repr., London, 1987), xvi.

[51] *Report of the Committee on the Provision for Social and Economic Research* [Chairman, Sir John Clapham] (London, 1946).

[52] National Statistics, *60 Years of Social Survey*, 15.

[53] A. H. Halsey, *A History of Sociology in Britain: Science, Literature, and Society* (Oxford, 2004), 96–99.

[54] Calder, "Introduction," x.

[55] Tom Harrisson, "Who'll Win?" *Political Quarterly* 15, no. 1 (January 1944): 23.

[56] Mass-Observation, "Don't Know, Don't Care," in *The Adventure Ahead*, ed. A. G. Weidenfeld (London, 1948), 56.

[57] Ibid., 56.

[58] See David Kynaston, *Austerity Britain, 1945–51* (London, 2007), 40–43, 69.

Already, in a *Picture Post* article of August 1944, Mass-Observation had noted how few British soldiers were bothering to fill in the form that would entitle them to vote, evidence of "a distrust, wide and deep, of politics in general and politicians in particular."[59] Its uncompromising accounts of popular ignorance in the immediate postwar period were intended to critique both the inadequacies of electoral democracy and the narrow-based methodologies of opinion polls. "When you give a man a vote, elementary education and Saturday afternoon off," wrote Harrisson in 1947, "you have not thereby altered the fact that he has a limited vocabulary and a foggy idea of the structure of the State, the character of nations, or the cryptic processes of finance." He argued that simply recording people's votes or their opinions imagined electors as "slot-mechanical spectators semi-supine on the sideline."[60] Politics was not simply about putting a tick in a box in a polling booth, or failing to do so, but about participating in, or feeling excluded from, more general political participation. The opinion pollsters, Mass-Observation suggested, were only interested in bald yes/no responses and treated the growing number of "don't knows" as a mere statistical residue. These pollsters suffered from the "fallacy of mistaking range for weight, quantity for quality, acceptance for conviction, and the statistics of social atmosphere for the dynamics of staying power," which "experience has proved can be fatal to democracy."[61]

Mass-Observation also sought to explore the complex relationships between voter apathy, ignorance, and the grey areas in between—to try to distinguish between the "the don't knows, the can't says, the won't votes."[62] In a 1948 article, Harrisson wrote that, for any questionnaire-taker, the F60D—the female in her early sixties, belonging to the lowest socioeconomic band (D), who had little knowledge or interest in politics—was a recognizable figure: "Among them we find the person who has slipped a generation or two in her ideas of who is Prime Minister; who, in the middle of the blitz, thinks Goering is Britain's Minister for Air; who believes the Closed Shop is a scheme for allowing shop assistants an extra holiday, or has a hazy idea that the Comintern has something to do with the music hall."[63] According to Mass-Observation, this familiar, uneducated figure was now being joined by younger people who were more openly cynical and less apologetic in their ignorance and whose unawareness of politics was partly a matter of personal choice: "The *Don't Know* prototype among the rising generation is frequently a *Don't Care*."[64]

Both of the main political parties also began to undertake substantial private research on apathetic and uncertain voters, simply described as "don't knows" in the public polls. The Conservative party pioneered this kind of work, under its chairman Lord Woolton, after its defeat in the 1945 election. In 1947, the party commissioned Mass-Observation to gauge public reaction to the *Industrial Char-*

[59] "Do the Forces Want the Right to Vote?" *Picture Post*, 19 August 1944, 25.

[60] Tom Harrisson, "The Public's Progress," in *The Public's Progress*, ed. A. G. Weidenfeld (London, 1947), 1.

[61] Mass-Observation, *Peace and the Public: A Study by Mass-Observation* (London, 1947), 55, 2–3.

[62] Mass-Observation, *Voters' Choice: A Mass-Observation Report on the General Election of 1950* (London, 1950), 5.

[63] Mass-Observation, "Don't Know, Don't Care," 57.

[64] Ibid., 58.

ter, a flagship publication of the "new Conservatism." Mass-Observation's study found that "a very large number of people know little about party politics and care little." One person in eight even believed the Charter to be the work of the Communist party. A member of the Conservative Research Department remarked that one might conclude that "Mass-Observation is some subversive Fascist or Communist organisation formed with the object of undermining confidence in the democratic way of life!"[65] In fact, as we have seen, Mass-Observation was interested in exploring the deeper motives of these uninterested or uninformed voters—but political research was increasingly concerned simply with identifying and targeting them. In 1948 the Tory party appointed Colman Prentis Varley as its advertising agency, and a CPV subsidiary, Market and Information Services Limited, undertook a study of 5,000 electors, resulting in the 1949 report, "The Floating Vote." This analyzed the age, gender, class, and leisure pursuits of undecided voters. It advised conservative strategists to focus on those among the uncommitted who seemed most likely to switch to the Tories: women, young people, small shopkeepers, and Liberals.[66] Political market research was beginning to use small samples both to correlate political with lifestyle choices and to target small groups of influential electors.[67]

In publicly disseminated research, however, this kind of examination of the deeper meanings behind poll and election results was now losing out to more quantitative surveys, perhaps because the latter were more easily interpretable by newspaper readers. In the late 1940s, Mass-Observation gradually lost commissions to polling and market research companies.[68] Mass-Observation's apparent lack of statistical rigor, which had been less of a problem before the war when other survey methods were in their infancy, came to seem more serious with the rapid development of scientific sampling. Its perennial focus on electoral apathy also seemed less of a concern than in the 1930s. The war had generated a hope that a new, more vibrant relationship between government and the people might emerge, and to some extent this hope seemed to be fulfilled. The immediate postwar period was something of a golden age for partisan two-party politics, with unprecedentedly high turnouts—at the 1950 election, 83.9 percent of the electorate cast their vote.[69] It took later analysis by the historian Steven Fielding to confirm Mass-Observation's contemporaneous impression that elections in the 1940s and early

[65] Harriet Jones, "'New Conservatism'? *The Industrial Charter*, Modernity and the Reconstruction of British Conservatism after the War," in *Moments of Modernity: Reconstructing Britain 1945–1964*, ed. Becky Conekin, Frank Mort, and Chris Waters (London, 1999), 180–82.

[66] Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, "Rationing, Austerity and the Conservative Party Recovery after 1945," *Historical Journal* 37, no. 1 (March 1994): 189–93. See also Mark Abrams, "Public Opinion Polls and Political Parties," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 27, no. 1 (Spring 1963): 11.

[67] See also Andrew J. Taylor, "'The Record of the 1950s Is Irrelevant': The Conservative Party, Electoral Strategy and Opinion Research," *Contemporary British History* 17, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 81–110; and Laura Dumond Beers, "Whose Opinion? Changing Attitudes towards Opinion Polling in British Politics, 1937–1964," *Twentieth Century British History* 17, no. 2 (2006): 199–200.

[68] Jeffery, *Mass-Observation*, 47–48.

[69] Jon Lawrence and Miles Taylor, "Introduction: Electoral Sociology and the Historians," in *Party, State and Society: Electoral Behaviour in Britain since 1820*, ed. Jon Lawrence and Miles Taylor (Aldershot, 1997), 3.

1950s were "primarily contests between activists in which many voters were dragged yawning into the polling booths."[70]

As a large-scale social survey, Mass-Observation effectively ended after the Second World War as its leaders moved on to other projects and its volunteers dispersed. Harrisson, the only one of the founding triumvirate to maintain a regular involvement with Mass-Observation after the war, attacked opinion polls for the narrowness of their concerns. Although he accepted that Gallup polls could now predict voting behavior quite accurately, he argued that this "does not mean that you can, therefore, predict other verbally stated things equally, any more than the man at the seaside who on sight guesses your weight within two pounds can, therefore, predict 1947 production by one quick glance round a factory."[71] For Harrisson, polling's concern with measurable opinions neglected a much broader field of popular moods and anxieties. It was this area that the government had regarded as politically significant during wartime when it had come under the umbrella category of "morale." Failure to address these concerns now, Harrisson suggested, would simply end up reproducing the mystifications that had allowed Britain to remain a flawed, incomplete democracy in the interwar period.

■ ■ ■

From the early 1950s onward, the kind of research into popular moods and attitudes that Mass-Observation had pioneered became increasingly tied into the market research industry. As markets slowly recovered from the war, the market research industry underwent major expansion. Manufacturers wanted to know how the war had affected markets by altering incomes, jobs, and family relationships, and market researchers were developing more sophisticated ways of designing questionnaires and obtaining samples.[72] The Market Research Society, founded in 1946 by a small group of about twenty researchers, most of them with a London School of Economics education, was largely successful in promoting the industry as both scientific and ethical.[73] It drew up a code of practice, sponsored various publications about market research, and represented the emergent profession in discussions with official bodies.[74] In the immediate postwar era, market research had a largely positive public image because it was associated with the end of austerity and government controls and with identifying and meeting the needs of consumers. It was seen as fundamentally democratic, helping to inform those in positions of power—either commercial or political—about the opinions of ordinary people.

The rising prestige of market research was reflected in the evolution of Mass-Observation itself. In 1949 Tom Harrisson relinquished control of the company

[70] Steven Fielding, "'Don't Know and Don't Care': Popular Political Attitudes in Labour's Britain, 1945–51," in *The Attlee Years*, ed. Nick Tiratsoo (London, 1991), 114.

[71] Tom Harrisson, "What Is Sociology?" *Pilot Papers* 2, no. 1 (March 1947): 18.

[72] Mark Abrams, *Social Surveys and Social Action* (London, 1951), 61–62.

[73] "Postwar Boom in Market Research," *The Times*, 27 April 1960; McDonald and King, *Sampling the Universe*, 83.

[74] John S. Downham, Eric Shankleman, and John A. P. Treasure, "Introduction: A Survey of Market Research in Great Britain," in *Readings in Market Research*, ed. John S. Downham, Eric Shankleman, and John A. P. Treasure (London, 1956), xxiv.

and it became a more traditional market research firm, Mass Observation UK Limited. Even before this, however, Mass-Observation was turning itself into a more narrowly defined market research organization. For example, its wartime report on the "social stigma attaching to margarine," itself a continuation of the prewar study conducted with Lintas, explored the "irrational" feelings about butter among the population—many consumers believing that it was "uniquely life-giving and nourishing, perhaps because it is a concentrated and golden form of milk, the maternal life-giving food." The report then contrasted these feelings with dietary evidence and taste tests among the Mass-Observation panel—a forerunner of the famous taste tests used for Stork margarine television commercials from 1955 ("Can you tell Stork from butter?").[75] Mass-Observation's two joint managing directors after 1949, Len England and Mollie Tarrant, both started as volunteer Mass-Observers in the early years of the war and were committed to continuing some of the more sociopolitical, less directly commercial work of the organization.[76] The move from socioanthropological observation to the analysis of consumer choice was gradual—and the continuities reflected the democratizing aims of market research, and its crossover with more general social research, in these years.

During the 1950s, market research became a highly visible feature of people's daily lives. By 1961, it was estimated that interviewers were capturing one in every ten British adults.[77] Interviewing was mostly done face-to-face, in homes or in the street. Women, so-called clipboard queens, were generally employed to do this because it was thought that they were better at getting people to talk and were treated more courteously than men. Interviewing was seen as an attractive job for middle-class women with school-age children. Harry Hopkins noted in 1963 that "the market-research lady, armed with samples and clip-board, was now rarely off the British family's doorstep ('snooper' no longer!)."[78] As one female market researcher recalled in 1995, "Market research had developed in a climate in which there was a limitless supply of middle-class ladies willing to earn pin money through part-time interviewing. The public liked and respected them, and market research was generally (by 1954) regarded as an important and valued activity."[79]

The other public faces of market research in the 1950s and 1960s were the all-male industry figureheads like Harry Henry of the McCann-Erickson advertising agency, Dr. Mark Abrams of Research Services Limited, and Dr. Henry Durant of Gallup (the use of titles by Abrams and Durant reflecting the industry's emphasis on its academic respectability). These men, all London School of Economics graduates and founding figures in the Market Research Society, were often featured in the national press arguing for the democratic usefulness and accuracy of market

[75] Typed report on the wartime status of margarine, TC Food 1937–53, 67/1/A, Mass-Observation Archive.

[76] Private information from market researcher who worked for Mass-Observation between 1956 and 1958.

[77] "Rapid Expansion of Market Research Interviewing," *The Times*, 27 March 1962.

[78] Harry Hopkins, *The New Look: A Social History of the Forties and Fifties in Britain* (London, 1963), 316.

[79] Dawn Mitchell, "Forty Years On," Association of Market Survey Organisations (AMSO) conference paper, 1995, cited in McDonald and King, *Sampling the Universe*, 35.

research and opinion surveys.[80] Market research relied so much on the cooperation of members of the public that such figures needed to publicly explain its methods and reassure people that their answers to sometimes odd or personal questions would be confidential.[81] Durant insisted that respondents liked giving such information: "People are often lonely and, after all, how often does someone go to the trouble of writing down what they have to say?"[82] Yet these men also served as the focus for residual popular anxieties about "snooping." Durant was lampooned in the *Daily Mirror* as "Professor Crystal-Ball" and "Sultan Quiz-Kid," who "probably has been the source of more uninvited interviews than any other man in the land" but who, on being interviewed himself, insisted on the interviewer signing a contract to grant him copy approval.[83]

Abrams was a classic example of the kind of public intellectual produced by the postwar synthesis of market and social research and its crossover into party politics. After working at the London Press Exchange in the 1930s, he undertook pioneering survey work during wartime, initiating the National Food Survey in Spring 1940 and investigating the impact of bombing on civilian morale for the Psychological Warfare Board. In 1946 he founded Research Services Limited, formerly the research department of the London Press Exchange, and developed it into one of Britain's leading survey companies, combining political and public sector work with more commercial research. He was sharply critical of Mass-Observation's research methods, particularly its use of small, unrepresentative samples and unstructured interviewing, which produced "dreary trivia" and "boring and unrelated quotations."[84] In one sense, Abrams was simply reflecting the contemporary orthodoxy about Mass-Observation, which was by then most likely to be remembered, as its archivist later wrote, as "an obscure and dotty escapade, a relic of the 1930s, with little or no relevance to the study of contemporary social science."[85] But Abrams's outright dismissal also ignored the continuities and crossovers that had existed between Mass-Observation and market research from the 1930s onward. Abrams justified market research in very similar terms to Mass-Observation's rationale for its activities in the 1930s: as a response to the problem of finding out information about ordinary people in a complex mass society and as a force for social good that would make popular opinions and attitudes known to decision makers.[86] Like Mass-Observation, Abrams was interested in people's motivations and aspirations and their commitment to and interest in politics rather than simply the yes/no answers measured in opinion polls. Abrams's research also considered apathetic or uncommitted electors. His studies of consumer behavior, widely reported in the popular press, argued that "consumer politics" was displacing "ideo-

[80] See Henry Durant, "Public Opinion Polls," *The Times*, 15 February 1951.
[81] McDonald and King, *Sampling the Universe*, 29.
[82] "Rapid Expansion of Market Research Interviewing."
[83] Cassandra, "The Straw in the Wind," *Daily Mirror*, 23 September 1959.
[84] Abrams, *Social Surveys and Social Action*, 107–8.
[85] Dorothy Sheridan, "Appendix to the Cresset Library Edition," in Mass-Observation, *The Pub and the People*, 352.
[86] Abrams, *Social Surveys and Social Action*, 53.

logical politics" and that the lifestyles and fashions of the affluent, secular young were undermining traditional class distinctions and political loyalties.[87]

The "don't knows" in opinion poll results, which had increased by the end of the decade to over a fifth of the sample, were an intermittent source of press comment throughout the decade.[88] As early as 1950, *The Times* complained that "the opinion polls still have to go on confessing that there persists in Britain a not small number of men and women who refuse to know anything."[89] In 1956, another journalist referred to "that clueless, lackadaisical Third XI, the Don't Knows."[90] In a 1959 newspaper article, the Labour politician Richard Crossman expressed concern about "the swelling army of 'Don't Knows.'"[91]

The Labour party, particularly during its long exile from office between 1951 and 1964, most fully developed market research methods aimed at targeting these "don't knows." A committed Labour supporter, Mark Abrams began doing research for the party in the mid-1950s. But there was considerable opposition to his work from the Labour left, and at one National Executive Committee (NEC) meeting he was compared to Joseph Goebbels.[92] Aneurin Bevan, party treasurer and deputy leader, famously complained that "this sort of thing will take all the poetry out of politics."[93] Even after Labour's traumatic defeat in the 1959 election (its third defeat in a row), the NEC refused to provide funds for Abrams. But with the help of *Socialist Commentary*, which had argued for the significance of the "floating vote" since the 1951 election, he conducted research among key voters that was published in the 1960 Penguin Special, *Must Labour Lose?*[94] This study concluded that Labour would have to overhaul its outdated working-class image in the context of rising affluence and voter apathy.[95] Abrams received more commissions after Bevan's death in 1960, supported by the modernizing Labour leadership of Hugh Gaitskell and Harold Wilson. He was made the party's official researcher in 1962, and over the next two years he conducted several well-funded surveys of what he called "uncommitted electors in uncommitted constituencies."[96]

The ruling assumptions of the growing industry of market research influenced these new types of political research in two main ways. First, market research was primarily interested in the core market for a particular product or in those who might be persuaded to buy it. The new political research similarly targeted either a party's core vote or the key voters who were seen as "switchable." Second, in the late 1950s market research was moving away from analyzing product prefer-

[87] See, e.g., Mark Abrams, *The Teenage Consumer* (London, 1959), and *The Newspaper Reading Public of Tomorrow* (London, 1964). See also Len Jackson, "A Market Research Expert Says . . . 'This is you!'" *Daily Mirror*, 19 November 1959.

[88] Hopkins, *The New Look*, 451–52.

[89] "The Don't Knows," *The Times*, 3 February 1950.

[90] "One for the Road?" *The Times*, 18 May 1956.

[91] "Crossman Says," *Daily Mirror*, 20 March 1959.

[92] David Butler and Anthony King, *The British General Election of 1964* (London, 1964), 67.

[93] Abrams, "Public Opinion Polls and Political Parties," 14.

[94] Wring, *The Politics of Marketing the Labour Party*, 57.

[95] Mark Abrams, Richard Rose, and Rita Hinden, *Must Labour Lose?* (Harmondsworth, 1960), 71.

[96] Wring, *The Politics of Marketing the Labour Party*, 66; Robert M. Worcester, *British Public Opinion: A Guide to the History and Techniques of Political Opinion Polling* (Oxford, 1991), 25; Butler and King, *The British General Election of 1964*, 69.

ences and toward the study of "brand image"—the set of associations that a brand had acquired for people as a result of personal experience, advertising campaigns, or hearsay.[97] Abrams found, for example, that the Tories were seen as the party of middle-class and young people, whereas Labour was seen as the party of the working class and "the spokesman and protector of the underdog." These respective images, he argued, were a problem for Labour when many workers no longer saw themselves as working class.[98] The new interest in brand image partly inspired the calls among the party's modernizers in the late 1950s and early 1960s to rename Labour the "Consumers' party," the "Social Democratic party," or the "Reform party."[99]

These developments in political market research were thus feeding into a wider shift of emphasis in commercial market research. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, market research had emphasized its sober, scientific credentials. From the mid-1950s, however, it increasingly explored the more speculative area of consumer motivation, often inspired by the advertising industry. This new emphasis on the psychological aspects of consumption demanded a return to more qualitative methods. In *Motivation Research*, Harry Henry argued that "in the fields of marketing and advertising, statistics are like bikinis—they reveal a good deal that is both interesting and instructive, but they usually conceal what is really vital." Motivation research favored the unstructured "depth interview," a common practice being the "funnel technique," which involved starting with a general discussion before narrowing down to the specific object of inquiry—discussing general household tasks as a prelude to investigating attitudes toward cake mix, for example.[100] This new type of research used "projective techniques" derived from clinical psychology, such as "asking the respondent to interpret pictures, complete sentences or attribute human characteristics to a product."[101] Motivation research was relatively expensive, requiring long interviews, which were then subjected to detailed analysis, so researchers would often use small samples (often thirty people or less)—a method that anticipated the modern-day focus group.[102]

In one sense, this represented the change that Harrisson had called for in the late 1940s: a movement away from quantitative sociology toward social psychology and anthropology and more intuitive methods that emphasized depth rather than range. By the late 1950s, advertising and marketing had become, in Frank Mort's words, "a promiscuous mixture of expert knowledge derived from sociology, literary criticism, psychoanalysis and the burgeoning field of market research."[103] But, unlike Mass-Observation in the 1930s and 1940s, motivation research's qual-

[97] McDonald and King, *Sampling the Universe*, 152; John Treasure, "Research to Make Guessing Easier," *The Times*, 18 October 1962.

[98] Abrams et al., *Must Labour Lose?* 23, 14.

[99] See Matthew Hilton, *Consumerism in Twentieth-Century Britain: The Search for a Historical Movement* (Cambridge, 2003), 270–71; Ben Pimlott, *Frustrate Their Knavish Tricks: Writings on Biography, History and Politics* (London, 1994), 386; and Philip Williams, *Hugh Gaitskell* (London, 1979), 538–39.

[100] Harry Henry, *Motivation Research: Its Practice and Uses for Advertising, Marketing, and Other Business* (London, 1958), 11, 50–51.

[101] Kleinman, *Market Research*, 3.

[102] Downham et al., "Introduction," xxix.

[103] Frank Mort, "The Commercial Domain: Advertising and the Cultural Management of Demand," in Conekin et al., *Moments of Modernity*, 69.

itative methods were almost exclusively concerned with the narrower question of consumer choice. One of its key subjects was the housewife, particularly her attitude to the new labor-saving products of the postwar era, such as cake mix and instant coffee.[104] Motivation research inspired great hostility among social scientists and more empirically minded market researchers, in the same way that Mass-Observation's nonscientific methods had aroused suspicion in the 1930s. The London School of Economics sociologist Terence Morris wondered if it was legitimate to discover "hidden anxieties" and then "play upon them for commercial gain," arguing that motivational research was "one of the long shadows of the Admass society of 1984."[105] Even Harry Henry, an advocate of motivation research, worried that "the field has been left rather too widely open to the charlatan or the humbug" with "a glib line in sales-talk, together with a smattering of psychoanalytical jargon."[106]

This branch of motivation research was primarily associated with Ernest Dichter, a man already condemned in Vance Packard's American bestseller *The Hidden Persuaders*.[107] His methods of "depth probing" and "deep projective techniques" were designed to dig into the subconscious of consumers and, in his own words, "to trap the interviewee into revealing his real self."[108] The British branch of his Institute for Motivational Research (formed in the United States in 1938) opened in London in 1957 to considerable press interest. Dichter was nicknamed the "Holy Mahout of Madison Avenue," and much satirical mileage was gained from his confident statements that "eighty per cent of all people questioned thought grapefruits more intellectual than oranges" and that the inner meaning of soup was "a potent magic, a symbol of love."[109] Dichter's work, located in the wilder reaches of the field, became a particular focus for public anxieties about market research in Britain in the late 1950s.

The ever-expanding profile of market research during this period attracted unease not only in the Labour party but also on the left more generally. In *The Uses of Literacy*, Richard Hoggart attacked the obsession with "opinionation," the desire to "elevate the counting of heads into a substitute for judgement" and erase the questions of cultural literacy—how people came by these opinions—that had been so fundamental to Mass-Observation.[110] In a coruscating attack on Abrams in the *New Left Review* in 1960, Raphael Samuel argued that he saw people only "as *consumers* of politics, behaving in politics much as they would—in the motivational research imagination—when confronted with mass-marketed commodities." While Abrams's work owed "more to the idiom of salesmanship than of serious sociology," Samuel argued, it had an entirely "unmerited aura of objec-

[104] Henry, *Motivation Research*, 184.
[105] Terence Morris, "Motive Research," *The Times*, 17 April 1959.
[106] Henry, *Motivation Research*, 1–2.
[107] Vance Packard, *The Hidden Persuaders* (London, 1957), 25–27, 31–35.
[108] "Selling to the Unconscious," *The Times*, 19 January 1959; "Pioneer of Motive Research," *The Times*, 14 April 1959.
[109] Cassandra, "Erbide with Me," *Daily Mirror*, 17 April 1959, and "Two Purl One Plain," *Daily Mirror*, 10 August 1961.
[110] Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (Harmondsworth, 1958), 201, 180.

tivity."[111] Hoggart and Samuel were both identifying a significant cultural shift. If Mass-Observation had seen itself as a strategic intervention into political and cultural life, the studied "neutrality" of political market research had a more fatalistic attitude. Political parties now had to "follow as well as lead," in Abrams's words, by responding to the inexorable movement of prevailing trends.[112]

Resentment at the growing hegemony of market research runs through Harrisson's 1961 book, *Britain Revisited*, which attempts to revive the more ethnographic spirit of Mass-Observation by regrouping some of his original research team for another field trip to "Worktown" (Bolton). Harrisson criticizes the idea of public opinion as "an all-embracing generality" and dismisses the "holy sanction" of market research and opinion polls. Reiterating his reservation about the stock answers given in questionnaires, he argues that "PUBLIC opinion is what a person will say out loud to anyone. . . . Many things which agitate many minds never reach this level at all."[113] The book shares with Hoggart's a concern for the impoverished forms of political and cultural literacy tolerated by mass consumerism. Its last two chapters are devoted to the ignorance of most people about politics when compared with their knowledge of celebrities such as Anthony Armstrong-Jones and Tony Hancock. As Harrison acknowledged, this ignorance was a more ambiguous issue than in the 1930s because of increases in educational opportunities and literacy in the intervening years. Noting the large numbers of extension classes, the raised school-leaving age, and the growing television coverage of politics, he concedes that "very few are hampered by purely financial reasons from becoming as 'educated' as they want to and can be."[114] Despite his misgivings about the work of Abrams and similar researchers, Harrison here seems to share with them the sense that apathy is an inevitable historical trend. This theme would be persistently echoed in market research conducted for political parties in subsequent years.

■ ■ ■

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, there were two key developments in the market research industry that fed directly into changes in political market research. The first was that the market research industry almost entirely lost its traditional associations with socially progressive aims, developing increasingly mechanistic models of market intelligence and consumer behavior. These models were mapped more or less directly on to political marketing, with little attempt to consider politics as an autonomous sphere with its own interests and dynamics. The second was that market researchers became increasingly eclectic in their use of methodologies. After a dip during the economic recession of the mid- to late 1970s, market research was a booming industry in Britain after about 1982. In the middle of that decade, its turnover was growing by about 20 percent a year.[115] One leading

[111] Raphael Samuel, "Dr. Abrams and the End of Politics," *New Left Review*, 5 (September–October 1960), 3–4.

[112] Abrams et al., *Must Labour Lose?* 71.

[113] Harrisson, *Britain Revisited*, 18, 211.

[114] Ibid., 263–64, 252.

[115] Kleinman, *Market Research*, 1; "At the Heart of the King Consumer," *The Times*, 31 May 1985.

market researcher recalls that this period was "like the Californian gold rush," as small, independent companies sprang up and "staked their claim to expertise overnight." Formal training in research methods was "almost nonexistent and occurred by serendipity." Market researchers were increasingly wedded to the quasi-academic concept of "bricolage," the use of a wide variety of research methods as and when they seemed relevant, "cherry-picking ideas and models of thinking that bear relevance to the increasingly complex problems they face."[116] According to Frank Mort, this new research was often pitched "at the highest levels of abstraction" and was "extremely speculative, driven by a mixture of popular sociology and crystal ball gazing."[117]

Advertising agencies were particularly keen on using methods developed from the field of motivation research, on the basis that the market was now segmented and consumers were making more complicated choices. A powerful idea behind these new forms of research was one that had first emerged in Abrams's studies of the 1950s: the supposedly declining relevance of class and the fragmentation of markets into small niches, defined by taste and lifestyle choice as well as traditional indicators like age, sex, income, and occupation.[118] A new form of social research emerged in the United States, termed "lifestyle research" or "psychographics," which constructed profiles of consumer types. The most influential prototype survey was the VALS (values and lifestyle) typology developed at Stanford Research Institute, a California think tank, in 1978. It divided the population into four basic groups: need-driven, inner-directed, outer-directed, and combined inner- and outer-directed.[119] VALS-influenced British models, such as the British Market Research Bureau's annual TGI (Target Group Index) survey, labeled consumers as "belongers," "achievers," "survivors," "sustainers," or "emulators." The different clusters were often given thumbnail characterizations such as "Fred, the frustrated factory worker."[120] The ad hoc typologies of psychographics were used to identify target groups for a particular product. By separating the "restrained" from the "venturesome" and "leaders" from "mainstreamers," market researchers sought to identify core markets or the consumers who were most likely to switch brands.

By the early 1980s, psychographics was being applied directly to political marketing. Here it was used to locate valuable electors—such as floating voters in marginal seats—and to find out how they might be "switchable." In a two-year period before the 1987 election, for example, Margaret Thatcher was won over to the psychographic methods of the advertising agency Young and Rubicam, which used a "4Cs" or "Cross-Cultural Consumer Characterization" system drawing heavily on the Stanford Research Institutes's VALS system. Young and Rubicam divided the electorate into three groups—the constrained (such as old-age pen-

[116] Wendy Gordon, *Goodthinking: A Guide to Qualitative Research* (Henley-on-Thames, 1999), 38, 18, 41, 45.

[117] Frank Mort, *Cultures of Consumption: Masculinities and Social Space in Late Twentieth-Century Britain* (London, 1996), 104.

[118] McDonald and King, *Sampling the Universe*, 166–68.

[119] Carroll J. Glynn, Susan Herbst, Garrett J. O'Keefe, and Robert Y. Shapiro, *Public Opinion: Politics, Communication and Social Process* (Boulder, CO, 1998), 419.

[120] McDonald and King, *Sampling the Universe*, 161; see also Winston Fletcher, "Consuming Quest for the Holy Grail," *Guardian*, 25 July 1988.

sioners and people on benefits), the innovators (well-educated, professional groups), and the middle majority. They concluded that the Tories should focus their attention on the largest single category of the middle majority, the "mainstreamers," who were "conservative, patriotic, home-centred, traditional."[121] The Conservatives' other advertising agency, Saatchi and Saatchi, also undertook psychographic research, studying what one of its executives, Tim Bell, called "the emotional attitudes which emerge when ordinary people discuss politics," focused on "directional research, target areas, how to attract women voters, skilled workers, and much else."[122] Psychographics provided a methodology and rationale for focusing on these uncommitted voters—the "don't knows" first identified by Mass-Observation and later targeted by Abrams.

The emphasis on floating voters was particularly linked in the public mind with a method also borrowed from market research and developed by Young and Rubicam: the focus group. The focus group assembled a cross section of about eight voters who met in an informal setting, usually someone's home, each of them being paid a small sum of money for their participation. Focus groups were much freer in form than directive questionnaires: they were "focused" around particular problems, but the facilitator directed the questions and the conversations were often allowed to take an unforeseen turn. There was nothing especially new about this method, either in general or politically oriented market research. While at the London Press Exchange in the 1930s, Abrams had conducted small group discussions; depth interviews with groups of voters had been used sporadically since the 1940s, becoming a common feature of electoral campaigns for both parties by the 1960s.[123] The basic technique of using simple trigger questions to kickstart relatively formless discussions had, of course, been widely employed by Mass-Observation and later motivation research. But the focus group was certainly more widely used as a political technique in Britain from the mid-1980s onward. It became even more important, particularly in the Labour party, after the failure of the major quantitative polling organizations to forecast the Conservative victory in the 1992 general election—raising a familiar specter of the 1990s, the voters who were apparently too embarrassed to declare that they voted Tory.

In the United States, focus groups were closely associated with the Democrats' aim of winning over what Bill Clinton's strategist, Stanley Greenberg, termed "the working middle class."[124] A few days after Clinton's victory, Philip Gould wrote a *Guardian* article congratulating the Democrats for pinpointing the feelings of neglect and resentment among this type of voter and concluding that Labour must find a way of appealing to "our Basildon equivalent of the 'working middle

[121] David Butler and Dennis Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 1987* (Basingstoke, 1988), 32–34.

[122] Brian McNair, *An Introduction to Political Communication*, 2nd ed. (London, 1999), 110. For a further discussion of Saatchi and Saatchi's role, see Deborah Mattinson with Tim Bell, "Politics and Qualitative Research," in *Qualitative Research in Context*, ed. Laura Marks (Henley-on-Thames, 2000), 176.

[123] McDonald and King, *Sampling the Universe*, 82; Jose Harris, "Labour's Political and Social Thought," in *Labour's First Century*, ed. Duncan Tanner, Pat Thane, and Nick Tiratsoo (Cambridge, 2000), 39; Wring, *The Politics of Marketing the Labour Party*, 122.

[124] See Stanley B. Greenberg, *Middle-Class Dreams: The Politics and Power of the Middle-Class Majority* (New York, 1995).

class.'"[125] (Gould went on to run a London-based polling group and consultancy, GGC-NOP, with Greenberg and another Clinton strategist, James Carville.) Like the Democrats, New Labour targeted this group through small discussions with crucial swing voters. For Gould, these focus groups, conducted in "unassuming front rooms" in places like Watford and Milton Keynes, identified nascent trends that could not be picked up by quantitative polls. He borrowed the idea of "intimation," from his old London School of Economics tutor Michael Oakeshott, to describe the way that public opinion could reveal "subtle intimations heralding the first emergence of deeper political shifts." Gould's book *The Unfinished Revolution*, published a year after Labour's victory in the 1997 election, is an ascension narrative, a story of how the party, under Tony Blair, finally learned to connect with "a rich vein of empirical common sense that has always been central to the British people."[126]

Gould's phrase, "empirical common sense," is ambiguous, suggesting something both scientifically measurable and elusively intuitive. Indeed, one of the paradoxical features of modern psychographics was its attempt to combine very general lifestyle profiles with highly quantitative methodologies, specifically the use of computing databases to manipulate statistical data using cluster analysis. It often constructed consumer profiles by combining conventional geographical or demographic variables (gender, age, socioeconomic class) with a more ill-defined field of values and lifestyles. In the 1980s, neighborhood information systems such as CCN's MOSAIC and CACI's ACORN (A Classification of Residential Neighbourhoods) emerged, which classified people according to both socioeconomic statistics and lifestyle choices. MOSAIC UK, for example, cross-referenced postcodes with information from the electoral roll, the census, credit ratings, and other sources to divide the population into named lifestyle groupings defined by house types (Suburban Mock Tudor, Coronation Street), jobs (Corporate Chieftains), or ethnicity (South Asian Industry).[127] The different groups were given representative names like Joseph and Agnes (Grey Perspectives) or Dean and Mandy (Blue Collar Enterprise).[128] Such databases were widely used by both market researchers and strategists for political parties, but they were not well known to the public.[129] The algorithms they used were copyrighted and, therefore, never subjected to social-scientific scrutiny. As Jon Goss argues, "In geodemographic systems great liberties are taken with the methodology to provide for the marketer elaborate consumer identities complete with first names, fictional slices of family life, personal dreams, and social weaknesses. Dressed as a precise science . . . the methodology constructs consumer identity as a highly subjective marketers' abstraction."[130] The insights from this kind of research also tended to filter through to public discussion in fragmentary and incoherent ways, for example, in the widespread (and almost

[125] Philip Gould, "The Politics of Victory," *Guardian*, 6 November 1992.

[126] Gould, *The Unfinished Revolution*, 327, 15, 272.

[127] See Barrie Gunter and Adrian Furnham, *Consumer Profiles: An Introduction to Psychographics* (London, 1991); and R. T. Whitehead, "Geodemographics: The Bridge between Conventional Demographics and Lifestyles," *Admap*, May 1987, 23–26.

[128] See Paul Barker, "Search for the Middle," *Prospect* 110 (May 2005): 43.

[129] S. A. Matheison, "Home in on Votes," *Guardian*, 3 March 2005.

[130] Jon Goss, "'We Know Who You Are and We Know Where You Live': The Instrumental Rationality of Geodemographic Systems," *Economic Geography* 71, no. 2 (April 1995): 183, 187.

always unreflexive) media use of terms for key voters such as "Mondeo Man," "Worcester Woman," or "Pebbledash People." One journalist referred to this media appropriation of "portmanteau labels," with their apparent origins in private polling and market research, as "pigeon-hole politics."[131]

Paradoxically, this often uncritical use of portmanteau labels for voters in the media often went hand-in-hand with a great hostility toward focus groups and market research. In the early days of the New Labour government in the late 1990s, the focus group came to symbolize much that was wrong with modern government and to crystallize the now long-held suspicion of market research among the press and public. Just as they had ridiculed motivation research in the 1950s, journalists had much fun with the kinds of off-the-wall focus group questions that compared political parties with commercial brands: "If X plc was a car, what type of car would it be?"[132] Or they attacked the Big Brotherish aspects of perception analysis or "people metering"—the use of electronic handsets to test focus group members' emotional reactions to particular phrases or ideas.[133] Commentators claimed that Britain was suffering from a "focus group epidemic" and that politicians were "bewitched by focus groups," which were a "short cut to anarchy."[134] In July 1997, three months after taking office, Blair was forced to deny in a BBC radio interview that he was leading a "government by focus groups," while defending them as a legitimate way of finding out voters' concerns, in the same way that the chairman of Marks and Spencer tried to determine the satisfaction of consumers.[135]

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Blair's comparison of political market research with a Marks and Spencer consumer survey suggests that, although the means of focus group researchers had their methodological roots in the work of Mass-Observation in the 1930s, their ends were now quite different. In the intervening years, the social and market research industries had evolved in quite surprising ways. As he watched the Mass-Observation project fizzle out after the war, Tom Harrisson's greatest fear was that market and social research would engage in a mistaken quest for scientific rationality. In the immediate postwar period, this field did indeed distance itself from Mass-Observation's qualitative methods in an attempt to become academically and scientifically respectable, as both the state and the market sought to address the practical demands of postwar reconstruction. As daily life became more comfortable and less politically contentious in the 1950s, nonacademic social re-

[131] Nick Cohen, "Angry Young White Man," *New Statesman*, 15 July 2002, 20–21.

[132] Nick Cohen, *Pretty Straight Guys* (London, 2004), 34.

[133] John Rentoul, Nick Robinson, and Simon Braunholtz, "People Metering: Scientific Research or Clapometer?" in *Political Communications: The General Election Campaign of 1992*, ed. Ivor Crewe and Brian Gosschalk (Cambridge, 1995), 108.

[134] Andrew Neil, "Only Cowards Listen to Focus Groups," *Daily Mail*, 15 August 1997; Simon Jenkins, "The Curse of Chequers," *The Times*, 29 January 1997.

[135] Colin Brown, "Blair Denies Focus Group Rule," *Independent*, July 30 1997; see also Jenny Kitzinger and Rosaline S. Barbour, "Introduction: The Challenge and Promise of Focus Groups," in *Developing Focus Group Research: Politics, Theory and Practice*, ed. Jenny Kitzinger and Rosaline S. Barbour (London, 1999), 1.

search shifted away from socioanthropological observation—including the study of popular ignorance and apathy pioneered by Mass-Observation—toward the analysis of consumer choice. It saw people as the autonomous authors of their own lives, calmly making rational decisions as individual consumers. From the late 1950s onward, however, the market research industry developed more varied research methods that, like Mass-Observation, aimed to be more intensive and flexible than traditional social science and quantitative polling as a way of exploring emergent social trends and attitudes. In subsequent years, the methods for collating and manipulating social data became more sophisticated, particularly with the development of computer databases. But this growing potential for scientificity coincided with a revived interest in qualitative, and often very speculative, social research not backed by the standards of proof or peer review in academia.

For much of the period under consideration, the subject of politically oriented market research flitted in and out of the public consciousness. Mass-Observation was well known to the public in the 1930s and 1940s, and market research attracted considerable press interest in the 1950s. With some qualifications, particularly during wartime, Mass-Observation generally remained true to its original aims of working independently of its clients and making its work as publicly available as possible.[136] Market research professionals like Mark Abrams and Henry Durant also clearly felt an obligation to explain their work to the public. As funded social research was directed into academia and government departments in the postwar era, however, market and social researchers were obliged to work for whoever would offer them business. The resulting research was often produced for private clients, from commercial organizations to political parties, and confidential to those clients. Political psychographics, for example, was shrouded in secrecy, as politicians preferred to present their policy decisions as the result of public debate, systematic research, or convictions borne out of personal experience. This secrecy meant that the makeshift methodologies of contemporary political and market research, which conflated conventional social-scientific variables with more subjective judgments about lifestyle, were rarely subjected to the kind of critical scrutiny that social scientists applied to Mass-Observation. The public unease with focus groups was partly attributable to this sense that the people who ran them were shadowy and unaccountable. According to the off-message Labour frontbench MP, Clare Short, focus group advisers were "the people who live in the dark."[137] The focus group was seen not as a neutral research tool but as a form of underhand political intervention, molding opinion rather than merely recording it and contributing to a general mood of political fatalism.

Mass-Observation had made no secret of its normative view of politics, but focus group researchers tended to conceal their prescriptive ambitions beneath a veneer of scientificity and neutrality. Indeed, these researchers often displayed (or at least professed) a remarkable lack of critical reflexivity. Gould and others tended to see their work as a means of uncomplicatedly tapping into the mood of ordinary people

[136] See Penny Summerfield, "Mass-Observation: Social Research or Social Movement?" *Journal of Contemporary History* 20, no. 3 (July 1985): 446, for a discussion of how the involvement of Mass-Observation with other bodies, and particularly the government, during wartime, sometimes jeopardized these aims.

[137] Kirsty Milne, "The Memo-Mad Ad Man Turned Political Strategist for Blair," *New Statesman*, 25 October 1996, 24.

in their "unassuming front rooms," apparently unaware of the ways in which such research was also a way of imagining and constructing "the people." Some of the academic research on political focus groups has been similarly unreflexive, focusing on the ability of "market intelligence" to make politics more "market responsive" by bringing the professional, dispassionate expertise of party outsiders to the problem of addressing the needs and wishes of voters.[138]

The market-based model of democratic participation that now dominates contemporary political culture has no adequate way of addressing an intractable problem of modern western democracies—low electoral turnouts and general political disengagement. The turnouts at the British general elections of 2001 and 2005 were 59 and 61 percent, respectively, the lowest since the wartime election of 1918. By its very nature, apathy is a more ambiguous entity than public opinion—it is difficult to determine whether it is a product of anger, disillusionment, ignorance, indecision or, as Home Secretary Jack Straw suggested in 2001, the "politics of contentment."[139] The history of politically oriented market research since the 1930s shows that there is nothing new about the problem of apathy. From the beginning, Mass-Observation concerned itself with this problem, arguing that it needed to be addressed by wider cultural literacy and a more inclusive political culture. In contemporary forms of political market research, however, the apathy of voters (and nonvoters) is simply taken for granted rather than critically explored. The "don't know, don't cares" and the "puzzled people" of Mass-Observation have become the "floating" or "target" voters, the endlessly courted but elusive chimeras of modern politics.

[138] See Lees-Marshment, *Political Marketing*, 32; and Nick Moon, *Opinion Polls: History, Theory and Practice* (Manchester, 1999), 177.

[139] Philip Johnston, "Lowest Turnout since 1874 Poll," *Daily Telegraph*, 8 June 2001.